SPECIFICATION

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

BE IT KNOWN THAT WE, Yasuhiko Isobe, a citizen of Japan residing at Kawasaki, Japan and Teruo Ootake, a citizen of Japan residing at Kawasaki, Japan have invented certain new and useful improvements in

INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION METHOD AND
APPARATUS, BUSINESS METHOD AND
COMPUTER-READABLE STORAGE MEDIUM

of which the following is a specification:-

TITLE OF THE INVENTION
>INFORMATION DISTRIBUTION METHOD AND
APPARATUS, BUSINESS METHOD AND
COMPUTER-READABLE STORAGE MEDIUM

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION
>This application is based on a Japanese Patent Application No.2002-042069 filed February 19, 2002, in the Japanese Patent Office, the disclosure

10 of which is hereby incorporated by reference.
>1. Field of the Invention
>The present invention generally relates to information distribution methods and computer-readable storage media, and more particularly to an

15 information distribution method for a contents distribution service via a network such as the Internet, and to a computer-readable storage medium which stores a program for causing a computer to distribute information using such an information

20 distribution method. The present invention also relates to an information distribution apparatus and a business method which employ such an information distribution method.
>2. Description of the Related Art

25 >The contents distribution service distribute contents, including image information and/or audio information such as movies and music, to users. The contents distribution may be feecharging or free. In the case of the feecharging

30 contents distribution, the contents are distributed to a user who has paid the required fees or has made a contract to pay the required fees. On the other hand, in the case of the free contents distribution, advertising fees are charged to the advertisers who

35 wish to distribute advertisements, and a contents provider distributes the contents by inserting the advertisements, so that user may receive the

contents free, together with the inserted advertisements.

When the contents provider one-sidedly inserts the advertisements when distributing the contents, it is difficult to distribute advertisements including matters that would always attract the user's interest. If the contents provider distributes the advertisements including matters that are not interesting to the user, the user will not see and listen to the advertisements with interest, and the advertising effect of the advertisements become extremely poor. As a result, from the point of view of the advertiser, the advertising expenses are not utilized effectively.

Accordingly, it is possible to notify in advance information the user is interested in, such as hobbies of the user, to the contents provider. In this case, the contents provider can distribute, to the user, the advertisements including the matters related to the hobbies and the like of the user. For example, such a method is proposed in a Japanese Laid-Open Patent Application No.10-79711. According to this proposed method, if a user is interested in sports, the contents provider can select advertisements related to sporting goods, advertisements in which athletes appear, advertisements in which a sport is being played, and the like, and distribute only sports-related advertisements to the user. In addition, the advertising fees to be paid by the advertiser can be determined depending on the number of advertisements or the time (or duration) of the advertisements received by the user. Hence, the user can see and listen to only the advertisements including the matters that are interesting to the user, thereby improving the advertising effect of the advertisements, and enabling the advertiser to

effectively utilize the advertising expenses.

The advertisements including the matters selected by the contents provider are distributed to the user by using (i) a first format which inserts the advertisement for a predetermined time before a program, during a program, after a program and/or between consecutive programs, as in the case of a 15-second commercial in the television broadcasting, (ii) a second format which displays the advertisement outside or inside the contents as in the case of banner advertisements, and (iii) a third format which inserts the advertisement indirectly in the contents as in the case of an intra-contents advertisement in which a character appearing in a program rides a bicycle which is to be advertised, for example.

In this specification, the formats of the advertisements which are distributed include formats which are determined by parameters related to time restrictions, parameters related to image restrictions, parameters related to attribute restrictions, and parameters related to audio restrictions. The parameters related to time restrictions include a timing at which the advertisement is to be distributed, and a time (or duration) of one advertisement. The parameters related to image restrictions include a position on a screen where the advertisement is displayed, color and tone of the advertisement, whether or not to use scrolling and/or blinking in the advertisement, whether or not a dynamic image is to be used for the advertisement, and whether or not a still image is to be used for the advertisement. The parameters related to attribute restrictions include whether the matters included in the advertisement are outside or inside the contents, and whether the advertisement is independent of or synchronized to

the contents. The parameters related to audio restrictions include a volume and the like.

According to the proposed method described above, the user can see and listen to only the advertisements including the matters interesting to the user. However, the format of the advertisement which is distributed is determined by the contents provider. For this reason, there was a problem in that the user may not always receive the advertisements with the format desired by the user. Consequently, when the advertisement is distributed with the format which does not suit the user's taste, the user may not see and listen to the matters included in the advertisement even though the user has interest in the matters included in the advertisement, simply because the advertisement is received with the format the user does not like. As a result, there was a problem in that the advertising effect becomes poor in such a case.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, it is a general object of the present invention to provide a novel and useful information distribution method, information distribution apparatus, business method and computer-readable storage medium, in which the problems described above are eliminated.

Another and more specific object of the present invention is to provide an information distribution method, an information distribution apparatus, a business method and a computer-readable storage medium, which enable a user to select a format of an advertisement to be received, so as to further improve an advertising effect of the advertisement.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide an information distribution

method for distributing contents and advertisements from a provider to a user apparatus via a network, comprising distributing an advertisement with a format requested from the user apparatus. According

5 to the information distribution method of the present invention, it is possible for the user to select the format of the advertisement to be received, so as to further improve the advertising effect of the advertisement. Hence, the user can

10 receive the advertisements with the desired format which suits the user's taste. On the other hand, the provider can provide a large variety of advertisements with the formats which are liked by the user, and distribute the advertisements using

15 products such as soft drinks and bicycles which appear within the contents, if the advertiser has no restrictions on distributing such materials. Furthermore, the advertiser can efficiently distribute the advertisements which are unlikely to

20 be disliked by the users. Hence, the advertiser can distribute a large variety of advertisements, such as advertisements which are concentrated within a short time span and advertisements which describe the product in detail.

25   A further object of the present invention is to provide a computer-readable storage medium which stores a program for causing a computer to distribute contents and advertisements to a user apparatus via a network, the program comprising a

30 procedure causing the computer to distribute an advertisement with a format requested from the user apparatus. According to the computer-readable storage medium of the present invention, it is possible for the user to select the format of the

35 advertisement to be received, so as to further improve the advertising effect of the advertisement. Hence, the user can receive the advertisements with

the desired format which suits the user's taste. On
the other hand, the provider can provide a large
variety of advertisements with the formats which are
liked by the user, and distribute the advertisements
5   using products such as soft drinks and bicycles
which appear within the contents, if the advertiser
has no restrictions on distributing such materials.
Furthermore, the advertiser can efficiently
distribute the advertisements which are unlikely to
10 be disliked by the users. Hence, the advertiser can
distribute a large variety of advertisements, such
as advertisements which are concentrated within a
short time span and advertisements which describe
the product in detail.
15   Another object of the present invention is
to provide an information distribution apparatus for
distributing contents and advertisements from a
provider to a user apparatus via a network,
comprising a unit to distribute an advertisement
20 with a format requested from the user apparatus.
According to the information distribution apparatus
of the present invention, it is possible for the
user to select the format of the advertisement to be
received, so as to further improve the advertising
25 effect of the advertisement. Hence, the user can
receive the advertisements with the desired format
which suits the user's taste. On the other hand,
the provider can provide a large variety of
advertisements with the formats which are liked by
30 the user, and distribute the advertisements using
products such as soft drinks and bicycles which
appear within the contents, if the advertiser has no
restrictions on distributing such materials.
Furthermore, the advertiser can efficiently
35 distribute the advertisements which are unlikely to
be disliked by the users. Hence, the advertiser can
distribute a large variety of advertisements, such

as advertisements which are concentrated within a short time span and advertisements which describe the product in detail.

Still another object of the present invention is to provide a business method for providing free contents service to a user by distributing contents and advertisements from a provider computer to a user apparatus via a network, and charging advertising fees for the advertisements to an advertiser, the business method comprising managing points depending on an advertisement and a format requested from the user apparatus; and distributing the advertisement with the format requested from the user apparatus, and controlling distribution of the contents depending on the points. According to the business method of the present invention, it is possible for the user to select the format of the advertisement to be received, so as to further improve the advertising effect of the advertisement. Hence, the user can receive the advertisements with the desired format which suits the user's taste. On the other hand, the provider can provide a large variety of advertisements with the formats which are liked by the user, and distribute the advertisements using products such as soft drinks and bicycles which appear within the contents, if the advertiser has no restrictions on distributing such materials. Furthermore, the advertiser can efficiently distribute the advertisements which are unlikely to be disliked by the users. Hence, the advertiser can distribute a large variety of advertisements, such as advertisements which are concentrated within a short time span and advertisements which describe the product in detail.

Other objects and further features of the present invention will be apparent from the

following detailed description when read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5   FIG. 1 is a diagram showing a structure of a system employing a first embodiment of an information distribution method according to the present invention;

        FIG. 2 is a flow chart for explaining an

10 operation of the first embodiment;

        FIG. 3 is a time chart for explaining a communication procedure between a provider and a user in the first embodiment;

        FIG. 4 is a diagram showing a contents

15 selection menu and an advertisement select mode selection screen;

        FIG. 5 is a diagram showing an advertisement receiving format selection screen;

        FIG. 6 is a diagram showing a details

20 setting screen;

        FIG. 7 is a diagram showing a details setting screen for a case where a mode for independently selecting advertisements is selected;

        FIG. 8 is a diagram showing a product

25 category selection screen;

        FIG. 9 is a diagram for explaining a display screen of a point list;

        FIG. 10 is a diagram showing a details setting screen for a case where a mode for semi-

30 automatically selecting advertisements is selected;

        FIG. 11 is a diagram showing a product category selection screen;

        FIG. 12 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more

35 detail;

        FIG. 13 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more

detail;

FIG. 14 is a flow chart for explaining creation and storage of an advertisement list;

FIG. 15 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail;

FIG. 16 is a diagram showing an advertisement receiving format selection screen;

FIG. 17 is a flow chart for explaining an adjusting process;

FIG. 18 is a flow chart for explaining an adjusting process;

FIG. 19 is a flow chart for explaining an adjusting process;

FIG. 20 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail;

FIG. 21 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail;

FIG. 22 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail;

FIG. 23 is a flow chart for explaining a process dependent on settings made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6;

FIG. 24 is a flow chart for explaining a point give-away process; and

FIG. 25 is a diagram showing formats of received advertisements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

FIG. 1 is a diagram showing a structure of a system employing a first embodiment of an information distribution method according to the present invention. This first embodiment of the information distribution method employs a first

embodiment of an information distribution apparatus according to the present invention, a first embodiment of a business method according to the present invention and a first method of a computer-readable storage medium according to the present invention.

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The system shown in FIG. 1 includes a computer system 2 and a terminal equipment (apparatus) 3 which are connected via a network 1 such as the Internet. The computer system 2 is provided on the provider end, while the terminal equipment 3 is provided on the user end. The network 1 may be formed by one or more cable networks, one or more wireless networks or, a combination of cable and wireless networks. The computer system 2 is formed by a computer having a known structure including a CPU, a storage unit, and input and output devices such as a display unit. The terminal equipment 3 is formed by a personal computer having a known structure including a CPU, a storage unit and input and output devices such as a display unit. The computer system 2 forms the first embodiment of the information distribution apparatus, and executes a program stored in the first embodiment of the computer-readable storage medium such as the storage unit. The computer-readable storage medium itself may be formed by any kind of recording media capable of storing the program in a computer-readable manner. The first embodiment of the business method is carried out by the computer 1 in the system shown in FIG. 1.

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For the sake of convenience, FIG. 1 shows a functional structure of the computer system 2. The computer system 2 includes a broadcasting contents part 21, a banner advertisement information part 22, an image data combining part 23, an advertisement information part 24, a streaming

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server 25, an advertisement-setting (hereinafter simply referred to as ad-setting) user data part 26 for setting advertisements, a point accumulating part 27, a Web server 28, and an advertisement

5 insertion information part 29. The broadcasting contents part 21 stores broadcasting contents including programs made up of image information and/or audio information such as movies and music. The banner advertisement information part 22 stores

10 information related to banner advertisements. The advertisement insertion information part 29 stores advertisement insertion information such as an advertisement list. The image combining part 23 combines the data from the broadcasting contents

15 part 21 and the banner advertisement information part 22, based on the advertisement insertion information from the advertisement insertion information part 29, if the banner advertisement is to be blended within the contents and displayed, and

20 supplies the combined data to the streaming server 25. On the other hand, when displaying the banner advertisement outside the contents, the Web server 28 attaches the banner advertisement information from the banner advertisement information part 22

25 depending on the parameters such as the tone from the ad-setting user data part 26, and transmits the banner advertisement information to the terminal equipment 3 via the network 1.

The ad-setting user data part 26 stores

30 ad-setting user data for setting advertisements, including information which determines the format with which the advertisement is to be distributed, such as parameters related to time restrictions, parameters related to image restrictions, parameters

35 related to attribute restrictions, and parameters related to audio restrictions. The parameters related to time restrictions include a timing at

which the advertisement is to be distributed, and a
time (or duration) of one advertisement. The
parameters related to image restrictions include a
position on a screen where the advertisement is
5   displayed, color and tone of the advertisement,
whether or not to use scrolling and/or blinking in
the advertisement, whether or not a dynamic image is
to be used for the advertisement, and whether or not
a still image is to be used for the advertisement.
10   The parameters related to attribute restrictions
include whether the matters included in the
advertisement are outside or inside the contents,
and whether the advertisement is independent of or
synchronized to the contents. The parameters
15   related to audio restrictions include a volume and
the like.

The advertisement information from the
advertisement information part 24 is supplied to the
streaming server 25 depending on the parameters
20   related to the time restrictions, for example, from
the ad-setting user data part 26. The streaming
server 25 is provided as a server for processing
dynamic image, and adds and/or inserts the
advertisement from the advertisement information
25   part 24 to the data of the contents or, the combined
data of the contents and the banner advertisements,
from the image combining part 23, and transmits the
data to the terminal equipment 3 via the network 1
if a number of points managed in the point
30   accumulating part 27 has reached a number of points
required to acquire the contents requested by the
user. As will be described later, the point
accumulating part 27 accumulates and manages the
points depending on the advertisements and the
35   formats requested by the user.

FIG. 2 is a flow chart for explaining an
operation of the first embodiment. FIG. 3 is a time

chart for explaining a communication procedure between the computer system 2 (provider) and the terminal equipment 3 (user) in the first embodiment. In FIGS. 2 and 3, the same steps are designated by

5 the same reference numerals. Steps S1, S3 and S6 through S10 are carried out by the computer system 2, and steps S2 and S5 are carried out by the terminal equipment 3.

In FIGS. 2 and 3, the step S1 transmits to

10 and displays on the display unit of the terminal equipment 3 a contents selection menu and an advertisement select mode selection screen. The step S2 notifies the contents selection and the advertisement select mode selection made by the user

15 to the computer system 2. The step S3 decides whether or not an advertisement selection request has been made. The process advances to the step S4 if the decision result in the step S3 is YES. The step S4 transmits to and displays on the display

20 unit of the terminal equipment 3 the advertisement selection menu. The step S5 notifies the advertisement selection made by the user to the computer system 2.

The step S6 adjusts the number of points

25 that are accumulated depending on the advertisement and the format selected (requested) by the user, in a case where an automatic point adjustment is set. The step S7 carries out a point pool and/or withdrawal process. The step S8 decides whether or

30 not a number of points required to receive the contents selected by the user is accumulated, and the process returns to the step S4 if the decision result in the step S8 is NO.

On the other hand, if the decision result

35 in the step S8 is YES, the step S9 adds and/or processes information according to the advertisement and the format selected by the user, with respect to

the contents selected by the user. The step S10
starts to transmit the advertisement having the
selected format and the selected contents to the
terminal equipment 3, and the process ends.

5   If the decision result in the step S3 is
NO, the step S11 selects the advertisement and the
format of the advertisement which are preset in the
computer system 2, and the process advances to the
step S9. Hence, in this case, the step S9 adds

10   and/or processes the information according to the
advertisement and the format selected by the
provider. The step S10 starts to transmit the
advertisement having the selected format and the
selected contents to the terminal equipment 3, and

15   the process ends.
             FIG. 4 is a diagram showing the contents
selection menu and the advertisement select mode
selection screen which are displayed on the display
unit of the terminal equipment 3 in the step S1. In

20   FIG. 4 and each of the screens which will be
described hereunder, a selected item is indicated by
a symbol "▣" or a symbol "o", and a non-selected
item is indicated by a symbol "□" or a symbol "o".
             FIG. 4 shows a case where a program A

25   requiring 300 points to receive, a program B
requiring 150 points to receive, a program C
requiring 500 points to receive, a program D
requiring 200 points to receive, a drama, a music
program and a variety program are selectable as the

30   contents. In addition, the advertisement select
mode is selectable between a user mode in which the
setting of the advertisements to be received, that
is, the format of the advertisements to be received,
is set by the user, and a provider mode in which the

35   setting of the advertisements to be received, that
is, the format of the advertisements to be received,
is set by the provider. In the particular case

shown in FIG. 4, it is assumed for the sake of
convenience that the step S2 selected the program A
as the contents and the user mode in which the
advertisements to be received is set by the user,
5   and the decision result in the step S3 is YES.
However, in a case where the provider mode in which
the advertisements to be received is set by the
provider, the decision result in the step S3 becomes
NO. The selection on the screen may be made by a
10   known method using a keyboard and/or a mouse which
are included in the input and output device of the
terminal equipment 3.
         FIG. 5 is a diagram showing an
advertisement receiving format selection screen
15   which is displayed on the display unit of the
terminal equipment 3 when the user mode in which the
advertisements to be received is set by the user is
selected on the screen shown in FIG. 4. In other
words, FIG. 5 shows the selection screen which is
20   displayed in the step S4. FIG. 5 shows a case where
a format which receives the advertisements before
and after and/or during the program, a format which
receives the banner advertisements, and a format
which receives the intra-contents advertisements,
25   are selectable as the advertisement receiving format.
In addition, FIG. 5 shows a case where a mode which
newly creates the ad-setting user data and a mode
which reads setting information from the ad-setting
user data, are selectable as the mode for setting
30   the ad-setting user data for setting the
advertisements. The present number of points owned
by the user and a "details setting" button are
displayed with respect to each selectable receiving
format.
35   The ad-setting user data corresponds to
the setting information stored in the computer
system 2 or in the terminal equipment 3. FIG. 1

shows a case where the ad-setting user data part 26
for setting the advertisements is provided in the
computer system 2. The setting information includes
data indicating the user's taste (or preference),
5   such as the received advertisement information (for
example, code number) which is set and stored by the
user in the past at a certain point in time, the
detailed data (for example, setting of the banner
advertisements), and a log indicating the
10 advertisement to which the user generated a
reception reject signal or the like. In FIG. 5, the
mode which reads the setting information from the
ad-setting user data is selected, and the read
setting information is used as a default value when
15 making a next menu selection. Accordingly, various
selection screens are displayed using the data read
from the ad-setting user data as default values, so
.as to urge the user to make inputs related to
changes, new settings and the like. When an "end"
20 button is selected, the selection made on the
selection screen is asserted and the selection
process is ended.
            FIG. 6 is a diagram showing a details
setting screen which is displayed on the display
25 unit of the terminal equipment 3 when the format
which receives the advertisements before and after
and/or during the program is selected on the
selection screen shown in FIG. 5 and the "details
setting" button is selected on the selection screen.
30 FIG. 6 shows a case where an advertisement
collective reception method and an advertisement
selection method are selectable. When the
advertisement collective reception method is not
selected, the reception of the advertisements during
35 the broadcasting of the program is selected.
However, it is of course possible to provide, on the
details setting screen shown in FIG. 6, an item for

selecting the reception of the advertisements during the broadcasting of the program. With respect to the advertisement collective reception method, it is possible to select a reception before the
5   broadcasting of the program and a reception after broadcasting of the program. The number of points gained by selecting the reception after the broadcasting of the program may be set smaller than the number of points gained by selecting the
10 reception before the broadcasting of the program. On the other hand, with respect to the advertisement selection method, it is possible to select a mode for independently selecting the advertisements and a mode for semi-automatically selecting the
15 advertisements. FIG. 6 shows a case where the reception before the broadcasting of the program is selected as the advertisement collective reception method, and the mode for independently selecting the advertisements is selected as the advertisement
20 selection method. In FIGS. 4 through 6, the display screen returns to a previous screen when a "previous" button is selected, and the display screen advances to a next screen when a "next" button is selected.
25   The details setting screen shown in FIG. 6 may be displayed in an overlapping manner on the selection screen shown in FIG. 5.
            FIG. 7 is a diagram showing a details setting screen for a case where the mode for
30 independently selecting advertisements is selected as the advertisement selection method on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6. In the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7, it is possible to select how to search and select the advertisements
35 from the advertisements which are providable by the computer system 2. More particularly, the advertisements can be selected according to the

product category, selected according to the company (brand) name, and selected according to the characters (celebrities and the like). When a "selection according to the product category" button

5   is selected, the user selects a product of interest, to thereby make it possible to select the advertisements related to the selected product. When a "selection according to the company (brand) name" button is selected, the user selects a company

10 of interest, to thereby make it possible to select the advertisements related to the selected company and the products of the selected company. In addition, when a "selection according to the characters" button is selected, it is possible to

15 select the advertisements in which one or more characters, such as movie stars the user is interested in, appear. When an "OK" button is selected, the selection made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7 and selections made on screen

20 shown in FIGS. 8 and 9 are affirmed. On the other hand, when a "cancel" button is selected, the selection made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7 is cancelled.

FIG. 8 is a diagram showing a product

25 category selection screen which is displayed on the display unit of the terminal equipment 3 when the selection according to the product category is selected on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7. A tree including the present number of points

30 that may be gained by the user, the categories of all of the products, and the products within each category, is displayed on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 8. For example, the product categories include electrical appliances,

35 personal computers, automobiles, foods, travel and the like. Companies A through C are selectable for the electrical appliances, and a television set

(TVs), a video deck (Video) and the like are selectable for the company C. In addition, the number of points that will be gained is displayed with respect to each selected product. In this particular case, the present number of points that may be gained by the user is 120 points, because 30 points will be gained by selecting the electrical appliances, 30 points will be gained by selecting the TV, and 90 points will be gained by selecting the foods.

When an "OK" button is selected in FIG. 8, the selections made on the product category selection screen are affirmed. On the other hand, the selections made on the product category selection screen are cancelled when a "cancel" button is selected. When a "point list" button is selected in a state where any one of the items displayed on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 8 is selected, a point list shown in FIG. 9 is displayed on the display unit of the terminal equipment 3.

FIG. 9 is a diagram for explaining the display screen of the point list. The display screen of the point list shown in FIG. 9 includes a table having columns for the selection, the company (brand) name, the product, the points, the time, the advertisement type, the appearing characters, and the thumbnail. The display screen of the point list also includes a column for the gained points. The thumbnail displays a still or dynamic image of an impressive scene within the advertisement, for example. A plurality of thumbnails may be provided with respect to one selection item. The column for the gained points displays a total P1 of gained points for the page being displayed, a total P2 of gained points for other pages, a number P3 of points carried over from before, a total P4 of gainable

points (P4 = P1 + P2 + P3), a number P5 of points
required to receive the contents selected by the
user, and a number (P4 - P5) of points carried over
to next time. A previous page before the list is
5 displayed when a "previous page" button is selected,
and a next page after the list is displayed when a
"next page" button is selected in on the display
screen shown in FIG. 9. The selections made on the
display screen shown in FIG. 9 are affirmed when an
10 "OK" button is selected, and the selections made on
the display screen are cancelled when a "cancel"
button is selected. In the particular case shown in
FIG. 9, the total P4 exceeds the number P5 of points
required to receive the contents selected by the
15 user, and thus, the series of advertisement
selecting operation is completed when the "OK"
button is selected, thereby making it possible to
receive the selected contents. Of course, the
selection items in the list shown in FIG. 9 may be
20 rearranged using a known sorting function.

Therefore, when the advertisements on the
display screen shown in FIG. 9 are selected and the
total P4 of gainable points reaches the number of
points required to receive the contents selected by
25 the user, the advertisement selecting operation is
ended, and the surplus points are accumulated in the
point accumulating part 27 shown in FIG. 1 which
manages the number of points owned by each user
independently. Each user may be identified by the
30 computer system 2 using a known personal
identification method, such as a known log-in method
which uses a user ID.

The product category selection screen
shown in FIG. 8 may be displayed in an overlapping
35 manner on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7.
In addition, the display screen of the point list
shown in FIG. 9 may be displayed in an overlapping

manner on the product category selection screen
shown in FIG. 8.

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FIG. 10 is a diagram showing a details
setting screen which is displayed on the display
unit of the terminal equipment 3 for a case where
the mode for semi-automatically selecting the
advertisements is selected on the details setting
screen shown in FIG. 6. In the details setting
screen shown in FIG. 10, it is possible to select

10   how to search and select the advertisements from the
advertisements which are providable by the computer
system 2, similarly to the details setting screen
shown in FIG. 7. More particularly, the
advertisements can be selected according to the

15   product category, selected according to the company
(brand) name, and selected according to the
characters (celebrities and the like). When the
selection according to the product category is
selected, the user selects a product of interest, to

20   thereby make it possible to select the
advertisements related to the selected product.
When the selection according to the company (brand)
name is selected, the user selects a company of
interest, to thereby make it possible to select the

25   advertisements related to the selected company and
the products of the selected company. In addition,
when the selection according to the characters is
selected, it is possible to select the
advertisements in which one or more characters, such

30   as movie stars the user is interested in, appear.
When an "OK" button is selected, the selection made
on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 10 are
affirmed. On the other hand, when a "cancel" button
is selected, the selection made on the details

35   setting screen shown in FIG. 10 is cancelled. The
details setting screen shown in FIG. 10 further
displays, in the form of a message, the number of

points required to receive the contents selected by
the user and the number of points that will be
gained by receiving the advertisements as a result
of selecting the mode for semi-automatically
5   selecting the advertisements. In the particular
case shown in FIG. 10, the number of points required
to receive the contents selected by the user is
"300", and the number of points that will be gained
by receiving the advertisements as a result of
10   selecting the mode for semi-automatically selecting
the advertisements is "300".

FIG. 11 is a diagram showing a product
category selection screen which is displayed on the
display unit of the terminal equipment 3 for a case
15   where the selection according to the product
category is selected on the details setting screen
shown in FIG. 10. A tree including the categories
of all of the products, and the products within each
category, is displayed on the product category
20   selection screen shown in FIG. 11. For example, the
selectable product categories include electrical
appliances, personal computers, automobiles, foods,
travel, individual setting, provider's choice
(recommendation), and the like. Companies A through
25   C are selectable for the electrical appliances, and
a television set (TVs), a video deck (Video) and the
like are selectable for the company C. According to
the individual setting, products are selected by the
computer system 2 at random according to a ratio
30   which will be described later, from the products for
which the details are set in the above described
mode for independently selecting the advertisements.
According to the provider's choice, the product
categories and/or products are selected by the
35   computer system 2 at random according to the ratio
which will be described later, excluding the
products which are set to be rejected by the user.

In addition, with respect to the selected product categories and/or products, the user can set a ratio of the number of points to be gained thereby. In this particular case shown in FIG. 11, a ratio "30"

5   is set for the selection of the electrical appliances, a ratio "30" is set for the selection of the personal computers, a ratio "20" is set for the selection of the individual setting, and a ratio "20" is set for the selection of the provider's

10 choice, and the computer system 2 selects the advertisements depending on the ratios of the selected product categories and/or products. Of the ratio "30" set for the selection of the electrical appliances, a ratio "20" is given to the selection

15 of the company A's electrical appliance and a ratio "10" is given to the selection of the company D's electrical appliance (TV). A total of the ratios of the number of points is "100" in the case shown in FIG. 11, but the total of the ratios is of course

20 not limited to "100".

When an "OK" button is selected on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 11, the selections made on the product category selection screen are affirmed. On the other hand,

25 the selections made on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 11 are cancelled if a "cancel" button is selected on the product category selection screen.

The product category selection screen

30 shown in FIG. 11 may be displayed in an overlapping manner on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 10.

Therefore, by setting the ratios of the product categories and/or products, the user can

35 notify the user's general taste (or preference) to the computer system 2. Moreover, it is possible to simultaneously enable both the individual setting

such as the selection of the advertisements and the formats on the user end (terminal equipment 3) and the general setting such as the selection of the advertisements and the formats on the provider end, that is, the computer system 2. Furthermore, by selecting the provider's choice, it is possible to provide the user with information of a genre which is not specified by the user.

The advertisement receiving format selection screen and the details setting screen therefor are not limited to those shown in FIGS. 5 and 6. For example, the advertisement receiving format selection screen and the details setting screen therefor may take any form, as long as the advertisements, such as banner advertisements displayed on the side or within the displayed screen, may be freely set to suit the user's taste. In other words, the user who dislikes dynamic image banner advertisements may turn off the dynamic image banner advertisements or, display the dynamic image banner advertisements in inconspicuous colors or tones by adjusting blending, for example. Accordingly, the advertisement receiving format selection menu may include the following check boxes "□" to be checked when being selected, and the details setting screen therefor may include the following items indicated by arrows "→".

□ Accept advertisements before and after programs and/or during programs
→ Details Setting: Select/reject sponsor company, Select/reject individual advertisements
□ Accept banner advertisements
→ Select/reject sponsor company, Accept dynamic image/Accept advertisements within display screen/Degree of blending (α-value of α-blending in the case of advertisements within display screen)

□ Accept intra-contents advertisements

→ Select/reject sponsor company, Set emphasis (for example, in the case of an advertisement for a soft drink of a company during the program, whether or

5 not to emphasize the vivid color of the soft drink, whether or not to emphasize a scene where a character drinks the soft drink, etc.)

When the mode for receiving the banner

10 advertisements is selected on the advertisement receiving format selection screen shown in FIG. 5, the advertisements may be set similarly as described above in conjunction with FIGS. 7 through 11 on the details setting screen. In addition, it is possible

15 to adjust the number of points by a setting shown in the following Table 1, for example.

Table 1

1 Banner Ad/Time	Number of Points
Display of Small Still Image Outside Display Screen	15 (Base)
Display of Dynamic Image	+15
Display Within Display Screen	+15
Size (Large)	+10
(Medium)	+5
(Small)	+0
Tone (Dark: $51\% < \alpha$)	+10
(Medium: $11\% < \alpha < 50\%$)	+5
(Light: $\alpha < 10\%$)	+0

20 In the case of the advertisements displayed on the side or within the display screen, it is assumed that the base is 15 points that are gained for displaying a banner advertisement for 1 hour, where the banner advertisement is a still

25 image which is displayed outside the display screen with a small size and a light color. If the user changes the setting to "dynamic image within the display screen having a medium size and light color"

(that is, a dynamic image banner advertisement within the display screen of the contents, which is lightly blended to the contents) as not particularly disliking such, +35 points are additionally gained and 50 points are gained in total. Hence, the user can select the advertisement receiving format in a range within the user's taste (or preference), and receive the program while effectively gaining points. On the other hand, the advertiser can provide advertisements which are conspicuous only to an extent such that the advertisements will not be disliked or passed by the users, thereby enabling the advertiser to maintain favorable impressions to the users.

Therefore, the user can efficiently receive, that is, watch and hear, the advertisements within a short advertising time, by selecting the advertisements having a large number of points that will be gained when selected. In addition, since the advertisements having the large number of points do not necessarily have long advertising times, various forms of providing the advertisements may be generated.

From the point of view of the provider, it is possible to notify the user of the number of points which will be gained when the advertisement is selected by displaying the number of points within the display screen of the advertisement itself or on the selection screen, for example. Moreover, the provider can distribute the program to the user after distributing the advertisements amounting to a certain number of points to the user, and thereafter charge an advertising fee which is dependent on the number of points to the advertiser. As a result, it is possible to realize advertisements having a high advertising effect at a low cost.

Because the contents receivable by the user is determined by the number of points owned by the user, the user can select the advertisements and the combination of the advertisements which suit the user's taste by referring to the number of points, and also select the receiving format of the advertisements which suits the user's taste. In addition, it is possible to set the receiving time of the advertisements to a short time or to a long time in the case of the user's favorite advertisement, for example, so as to cope with various needs of the user. Therefore, the advertisements and the receiving format can be freely selected to suit each user.

If the same advertisement is received repeatedly, the advertising effect of the advertisement may deteriorate, and in this case, it is possible to decrease the number of points that will be gained by receiving the advertisement by 10% every time the same advertisement is received, for example. Moreover, in the case of a story-based advertisement having 10 consecutive episodes, for example, bonus points may be added if all episodes from the first episode to the last (tenth) episode are received by the user, so as to urge the user to positively receive the advertisements.

Next, a more detailed description will be given of the processes of the steps S4 and S5 shown in FIG. 2, by referring to FIGS. 12 and 13.

FIG. 12 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail. More particularly, FIG. 12 shows the operation up to the display of the details setting screen for a case where the format for receiving the advertisements before and after the program and/or during the program is selected on the selection screen shown in FIG. 5, and the "details setting"

button is selected on this selection screen.

In FIG. 12, a step S21 displays the selection screen shown in FIG. 5, and a step S22 decides whether or not the "end" button is selected. If the decision result in the step S22 is YES, a step S23 calculates a total number of points gained by the user according to each advertisement and receiving format thereof, and accumulates the total number in the point accumulating part 27. A step S24 updates the ad-setting user data within the ad-setting user data part 26 depending on the total number of points accumulated in the point accumulating part 27, and the process ends.

On the other hand, if the decision result in the step S22 is NO, a step S25 decides whether or not the format for receiving the advertisements before and after the program and/or during the program is selected on the selection screen shown in FIG. 5 and the "details setting" button on this selection screen is selected. If the decision result in the step S25 is NO, a step S26 decides whether or not the format for receiving the banner advertisements is selected and the "details setting" button is selected. If the decision result in the step S26 is NO, a step S27 decides whether or not the format for receiving the intra-contents advertisements is selected and the "details setting" button is selected. The process returns to the step S21 if the decision result in the step S27 is NO.

If the decision result in the step S25 is YES, a step S28 decides whether or not the mode which reads the setting information from the ad-setting user data is selected on the selection screen shown in FIG. 5, as the mode for setting the ad-setting user data for setting the advertisements. If the decision result in the step S28 is YES, a step S29 reads the ad-setting user data from the ad-

setting user data part 26 and uses the read ad-setting user data as default values for the settings. After the step S29 or, if the mode which newly creates the ad-setting user data is selected and the decision result in the step S28 is NO, a step S30 displays the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6 for setting the details with respect to the format for receiving the advertisements before and after the program and/or during the program, according to the ad-setting user data. In addition, a step S31 reads the settings made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6, and the process returns to the step S21. The details of the step S31 will be described later in conjunction with FIG. 13.

If the decision result in the step S26 is YES, a step S32 decides whether or not the mode which reads the setting information from the ad-setting user data is selected on the selection screen shown in FIG. 5, as the mode for setting the ad-setting user data for setting the advertisements. If the decision result in the step S32 is YES, a step S33 reads the ad-setting user data from the ad-setting user data part 26 and uses the read ad-setting user data as default values for the settings. After the step S3 or, if the mode which newly creates the ad-setting user data is selected and the decision result in the step S32 is NO, a step S34 displays the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6 for setting the details with respect to the format for receiving the banner advertisements, according to the ad-setting user data. In addition, a step S35 reads the settings made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6, and the process returns to the step S21.

If the decision result in the step S27 is YES, a step S36 decides whether or not the mode which reads the setting information from the ad-

setting user data is selected on the selection
screen shown in FIG. 5, as the mode for setting the
ad-setting user data for setting the advertisements.
If the decision result in the step S36 is YES, a
5   step S37 reads the ad-setting user data from the ad-
setting user data part 26 and uses the read ad-
setting user data as default values for the settings.
After the step S37 or, if the mode which newly
creates the ad-setting user data is selected and the
10   decision result in the step S36 is NO, a step S38
displays the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6
for setting the details with respect to the format
for receiving the intra-contents advertisements,
according to the ad-setting user data. In addition,
15   a step S39 reads the settings made on the details
setting screen shown in FIG. 6, and the process
returns to the step S21.

        FIG. 13 is a flow chart for explaining a
portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more
20   detail. More particularly, FIG. 13 shows the
operation up to the display of the details setting
screen for a case where the advertisement selection
method is selected and the details setting screens
shown in FIGS. 7 and 8 are displayed.

25   The process shown in FIG. 13 is started
when carrying out the process of the step S31 shown
in FIG. 12, and a step S41 shown in FIG. 13 decides
whether or not the "previous" button is selected on
the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6. If the
30   decision result in the step S41 is YES, the process
returns from the step S31 to the step S21 in FIG. 12.
On the other hand, if the decision result in the
step S41 is NO, a step S42 decides whether or not
the mode for independently selecting the
35   advertisements is selected as the advertisement
selection method. The process advances to a step
S43 if the decision result in the step S42 is YES,

and the process advances to a step S53 which will be described later if the decision result in the step S42 is NO.

The step S43 displays the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7, and a step S44 decides whether the "OK" button or the "cancel" button on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 7 is selected and whether the "selection according to the product category" button, the "selection according to the company (brand) name" button or the "selection according to the characters" button is selected. If the "cancel" button is selected, the process returns to the step S41 from the step S44. On the other hand, if the "OK" button is selected, the process advances to a step S51 which will be described later from the step S44. In addition, if the "selection according to the product category" button, the "selection according to the company (brand) name" button or the "selection according to the characters" button is selected, the process advances to a corresponding step from the step S44. For the sake of convenience, a description will be given of a case where the "selection according to product category" button is selected, as described above in conjunction with FIG. 7.

In this case, the process advances to a step S45 which displays the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 8. A step S46 decides whether the "OK" button, the "cancel" button or the "point list" button is selected on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 8. If the "OK" button is selected, the process advances to a step 47 from the step S46. The step S47 updates the data within the ad-setting user data part 26, and the process returns to the step S43. If the "cancel" button is selected, the process returns to the step S43 from the step S46. In

addition, if the "point list" button is selected, the process advances to a step S48 from the step S46.

The step S48 displays the display screen of the point list shown in FIG. 9. A step S49

5 decides whether or not a user operation is made on the display screen of the point list shown in FIG. 9. More particularly, if the decision result in the step S49 is YES and the "OK" button is selected, the process returns to the step S45. If the decision

10 result in the step S49 is NO, the process returns to the step S48. If the decision result in the step S49 is YES, a step S50 recalculates the points of each page of the point list shown in FIG. 9 and updates the display, and the process returns to the

15 step S48.

The step S51 updates the data within the ad-setting user data part 26. A step S52 creates and stores an advertisement list which will be described later in conjunction with FIG. 14, and the

20 process returns to the step S31 shown in FIG. 12.

A step S53 displays the details setting screen shown in FIG. 10, and a step S54 decides whether the "OK" button or the "cancel" button is selected on the details setting screen shown in FIG.

25 10 and whether the "selection according to the product category" button, the "selection according to the company (brand) name" button or the "selection according to the characters" button is selected. If the "cancel" button is selected, the

30 process returns to the step S41 from the step S54. If the "OK" button is selected, the process advances to the step S51 from the step S54. In addition, if the "selection according to the product category" button, the "selection according to the company

35 (brand) name" button or the "selection according to the characters" button is selected, the process advances to a corresponding step from the step S54.

For the sake of convenience, a description will be given of a case where the "selection according to product category" button is selected, as described above in conjunction with FIG. 10.

5   In this case, the process advances to a step S55 which displays the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 11. A step S56 decides whether the "OK" button or the "cancel" button is selected on the product category selection

10 screen shown in FIG. 11 and whether a user operation is made on the product category selection screen. If the "OK" button is selected, the process advances to a step 57 from the step S56. The step S57 updates the data within the ad-setting user data

15 part 26, and the process returns to the step S53. If the "cancel" button is selected, the process returns to the step S53 from the step S56. In addition, if the user operation is made on the product category selection menu, the process

20 advances to a step S58 from the step S56. The step S58 recalculates the points of each page of the point list shown in FIG. 9 and updates the display, and the process returns to the step S55.

    FIG. 14 is a flow chart for explaining

25 creation and storage of the advertisement list. In FIG. 14, a step S61 decides whether or not the mode for independently selecting the advertisements is selected as the advertisement selection method on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6. If the

30 decision result in the step S61 is YES, a step S62 rearranges at random the advertisements selected by the user. A step S63 stores a list of rearranged advertisements into the advertisement insertion information part 29 shown in FIG. 1, as the

35 advertisement list. A step S64 calculates the present number of points of the user, and the process ends. On the other hand, if the mode for

semi-automatically selecting the advertisements is selected as the advertisement selection method and the decision result in the step S61 is NO, a step S65 selects the advertisements at random by the provider, from the selected product category, so as to match the ratios of the setting information. In addition, a step S66 stores a list of advertisements selected by the provider into the advertisement insertion information part 29, as the advertisement list, and the process advances to the step S64 described above.

When initially selecting the advertisements completely at random, the provider mode in which the receiving format is selected by the provider may be selected on the advertisement select mode selection screen or, the ratio for the provider's choice may be set to 100% on the product category selection screen shown in FIG. 11. In this case, the advertisements which are selected by the provider are distributed to the user according to the format selected by the provider. The user creates information indicating the user's taste (preference), and this information indicating the user's taste is stored at the provider end and/or the user end. The creation and storage of the information indicating the user's taste may be made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 10 or on another setting screen.

Even when the advertisements are selected completely at random, it is desirable not to distribute to the user the advertisements which do not suit the user's taste and not to distribute the advertisements in the format which does not suit the user's taste. Hence, the advertisements and the receiving format which do not suit the user's taste may be stored in a log every time the user indicates the dislike for the advertisement and/or the

receiving format by selecting a "reject" button, and
the distribution of the advertisements may be made
based on the log, so that the advertisements
disliked by the user will not be distributed to the
5   user and the receiving format disliked by the user
will not be used with respect to the user.

The provider selects the advertisements
and the format of the advertisements based on the
information indicating the user's taste, and
10 distributes to the user the selected advertisements
which are in order or shuffled, with the selected
format. The provider distributes the program
(contents) selected by the user when the number of
points owned by the user reaches the number required
15. to receive the selected program or, when it becomes
likely that the number of points owned by the user
will reach the number required to receive the
selected program. The provider can charge the
advertising fees to the advertiser depending on the
20 number of times the advertisement is distributed,
for example.

Next, a more detailed description will be
given of the process of the step S6 shown in FIG. 2,
by referring to FIGS. 15 through 19. FIG. 15 is a
25 flow chart for explaining a portion of the process
shown in FIG. 2 in more detail. More particularly,
FIG. 15 shows the process of the step S6 in more
detail.

In a case where the computer system 2 has
30 a function of setting automatic adjustment of the
points, an advertisement receiving format selection
screen shown in FIG. 16 is displayed on the display
unit of the terminal equipment 3 in place of the
advertisement receiving format selection screen
35 shown in FIG. 5.   FIG. 16 is a diagram showing the
advertisement receiving format selection screen. In
FIG. 16, those parts which are the same as those

corresponding parts in FIG. 5 are shown with the same designations, and a description thereof will be omitted.

In the advertisement receiving format selection screen shown in FIG. 16, it is possible to select a mode which deletes surplus points by automatic adjustment, as a setting for the automatic adjustment of the points. When the mode which deletes the surplus points by the automatic adjustment is selected and a "priority setting" button is selected, a priority setting screen for automatic adjustment, which is shown on the right side of FIG. 16, is displayed on the display unit of the terminal equipment 3. The priority setting screen for the automatic adjustment may be displayed in an overlapping manner on the advertisement receiving format selection screen as shown in FIG. 16 or, displayed as a separate screen.

Items such as the advertisements before and after the program and/or during the program, the banner advertisements and the intra-contents advertisements are selectable on the priority setting screen for the automatic adjustment. The priority of the selected item can be changed by operating a "Δ" button and a "∇" button. When an "OK" button is selected, the selections made on the priority setting screen for the automatic adjustment are affirmed. On the other hand, when a "cancel" button is selected, the selections made of the priority setting screen for the automatic adjustment are cancelled.

In FIG. 15, a step S71 decides whether or not the mode for deleting surplus points by automatic adjustment is selected on the advertisement receiving format selection screen shown in FIG. 16, as a setting for the automatic adjustment of points. The process ends if the

decision result in the step S71 is NO. On the other
hand, if the decision result in the step S71 is YES,
a step S72 reads data of the priority of the
automatic adjustment which is set on the priority

5   setting screen for the automatic adjustment. A step
S73 decides whether or not surplus points exist, and
the process ends if there are no surplus points and
the decision result in the step S73 is NO. If there
are surplus points and the decision result in the

10   step S73 is YES, a step S74 decides whether or not
an adjustment has yet to be made with respect to a
target item which is to be adjusted. The process
ends if the decision result in the step S74 is NO.
If the decision result in the step S74 is YES, a

15   step S75 carries out an adjusting process with
respect to the target items which have not yet been
adjusted, starting from the items having the high
priority. A step S76 subtracts an adjusted amount
from the surplus points, and the process returns to

20   the step S72.
FIG. 17 is a flow chart for explaining an
adjusting process of the step S75 shown in FIG. 15
for a case where the item having the high priority
is the advertisement before and after the program

25   and/or during the program. In FIG. 17, a step S81
reads the selected advertisement from the
advertisement list within the advertisement
insertion information part 29. A step S82 searches
for a combination of advertisements which amount to

30   a number of points close to a value which is less
than or equal to the surplus points, from the
combination of the selected advertisements. A step
S83 deletes from the advertisement list the
combination of advertisements found by the search in

35   the step S83, and the process ends.
FIG. 18 is a flow chart for explaining an
adjusting process of the step S75 shown in FIG. 15

for a case where the item having the high priority
is the banner advertisement. In FIG. 18, a step S84
reads the banner advertisement information within
the banner advertisement information part 22. A
5   step S85 adjusts the setting of the effects of the
selected banner advertisement at random in a
direction so as to reduce the effects. A step S86
updates the banner advertisement information within
the banner advertisement information part 22, based
10   on the banner advertisement having the effects
adjusted in the step S85, and the process ends.

        FIG. 19 is a flow chart for explaining an
adjusting process of the step S75 shown in FIG. 15
for a case where the item having the high priority
15   is the intra-contents advertisement. In FIG. 19, a
step S87 reads the advertisement insertion
information within the advertisement insertion
information part 29. A step S88 changes the
advertisement insertion information in a direction
20   so as to eliminate the advertisement. A step S89
updates the advertisement insertion information
within the advertisement insertion information part
29, based on the advertisement insertion information
changed in the step S88, and the process ends.

25   In a case where the total number of points
gained as a result of selecting the advertisements
and/or the receiving format exceeds the number of
points required to acquire the selected contents, it
is troublesome to make fine adjustment of the points.
30   On the other hand, the user may feel at a loss if
the user receives advertisements which are more than
necessary to acquire the selected contents.
Accordingly, the advertisements and/or the receiving
format amounting to the surplus (or unnecessary)
35   points are automatically deleted. The priority
information which determines which advertisement
and/or which receiving format are to be deleted, is

adjustable on the user end according to the setting made by the user. Therefore, it is possible prevent an undesirable situation where the user manually deletes an excessively large number of points, and the surplus points can be made inconspicuous in terms of the advertisements and/or the receiving format.

For example, suppose that a total of 355 points are gained by the user and there are 55 surplus points, as shown in FIG. 9. In this case, a fine adjustment amounting to the surplus points can be made by removing one or more advertisements from the receiving item. In addition, a fine adjustment amounting to the surplus points can also be made by slightly changing the setting with respect to the banner advertisements, such as that shown in the Table 1, that is, changing the setting of the banner advertisements in a direction so as to make the contents more easily visible (interfered less by the banner advertisements).

Next, a more detailed description will be given of a point pool and/or withdrawal process of the steps S7 and S8 shown in FIG. 2, by referring to FIG. 20. FIG. 20 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail. More particularly, FIG. 20 shows the process of the steps S7 and S8.

In FIG. 20, a step S121 decides whether or not the number of points exceeds or, is less than, the number of points required to acquire the contents selected by the user. The process ends if the decision result in the step S121 is NO. If the decision result in the step S121 is YES, a step S122 subtracts or adds the points owned by the user and read from the point accumulating part 27, from or to the number of points detected in the step S121. A step S123 decides whether or not a result of the

subtraction or addition in the step S122 is less
than or equal to zero. The process advances to a
step S124 if the decision result in the step S123 is
NO, and the process advances to a step S125 if the
5   decision result in the step S123 is YES.

The step S124 judges that the number of
points owned by the user has reached the number of
points required to acquire the contents selected by
the user, and updates the points of the user
10   accumulated in the point accumulating part 27. In
this case, the decision result in the step S8 shown
in FIG. 2 becomes YES, and the process shown in FIG.
20 ends. Hence, the process advances to the step S9
shown in FIG. 2.

15   On the other hand, the step S125 judges
that the number of points owned by the user has not
reached the number of points required to acquire the
contents selected by the user, and displays a
message to the user on the display unit of the
20   terminal equipment 3 to indicate that the number of
points is insufficient to acquire the contents
selected by the user, without updating the points of
the user accumulated in the point accumulating part
27. In this case, the decision result in the step
25   S8 shown in FIG. 2 becomes NO, and the process shown
in FIG. 20 ends. Thus, the process returns to the
step S4 shown in FIG. 2.

Next, a more detailed description will be
given of the process of the steps S9 and S10 shown
30   in FIG. 2, by referring to FIGS. 21 and 22.

FIG. 21 is a flow chart for explaining a
portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more
detail. More particularly, FIG. 21 shows the
process of the step S9 in more detail. In FIG. 21,
35   a step S91 decides whether or not the format for
receiving the advertisements before and after the
program and/or during the program is selected on the

advertisement receiving format selection screen
shown in FIG. 5, for example. If the decision
result in the step S91 is YES, a step S92 creates an
advertisement list in the advertisement insertion

5   information part 29 and inserts the advertisements
in the contents from the broadcasting contents part
21, by the image data combining part 23, according
to the advertisement list. After the step S92 or,
if the decision result in the step S91 is NO, a step

10   S93 decides whether or not the format for receiving
the intra-contents advertisements is selected on the
advertisement receiving format selection screen
shown in FIG. 5, for example. If the decision
result in the step S93 is YES, a step S94 carries

15   out an image processing with respect to the contents
from the broadcasting contents part 21, by the image
data combining part 23, using the advertisement
insertion information within the advertisement
insertion information part 29. The advertisements

20   are combined into the contents by this imaging
process.
          After the step S94 or, if the decision
result in the step S93 is NO, a step S95 decides
whether or not the format for receiving the banner

25   advertisements is selected on the advertisement
receiving format receiving screen shown in FIG. 5,
for example. If the decision result in the step S95
is YES, a step S96 creates the matters of the banner
advertisements, by the image data combining part 23,

30   according to the banner advertisement information
within the banner advertisement information part 22.
A step S97 decides whether or not the display of the
banner advertisements in the Table 1, for example,
within the display screen, is valid. The process

35   advances to a step S98 if the decision result in the
step S97 is YES. The step S98 combines the banner
advertisements on the contents, by the image

combining part 23, according to the α-blending or the like.

If the decision result in the step S95 or S97 is NO or, after the step S98, a step S99 carries out a screen layout process. Preprocessing of the Web server 28, such as the display of the banner advertisements, is included in the screen layout process. A step S100 outputs the processed data, including the contents and the advertisements, to the streaming server 25, and the process ends.

FIG. 22 is a flow chart for explaining a portion of the process shown in FIG. 2 in more detail. More particularly, FIG. 22 shows the process of the step S10 shown in FIG. 2 in more detail. In FIG. 22, a step S101 starts distribution of the contents, including the advertisements, from the streaming server 25. A step S102 decides whether or not the transmission of the contents has ended or whether or not the transmission of the contents has been interrupted. The process returns to the step S101 if the decision result in the step S102 is NO. If the decision result in the step S102 is YES, a step S103 checks the transmission state of the contents and the transmission state of the advertisements. More particularly, the step S103 carries out a user reception state and/or end confirmation process in the computer system 2 or the terminal equipment 3, to check whether or not the advertisements and the contents have been distributed up to the end. A step S104 decides whether or not the number of points gained by the user needs to be adjusted. If the decision result in the step S104 is YES, a step S105 adjusts the number of points of the user accumulated in the point accumulating part 27 by adding or subtracting points. If the decision result in the step S104 is NO or, after the step S105, the process ends.

The user may dislike interruptions during the program. In such a case, the user may set the advertisement collective reception method on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6, so as to collectively receive the advertisements. As a result, the program is distributed to the user continuously without being interrupted. Since the provider can obtain the information related to the settings made by the user on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6 from the Web server 28, the provider can distribute all of the advertisements to the user before the distribution of the program, including the advertisements which should originally be inserted during the program. However, when the advertisements are distributed in succession to the user, the user may leave his seat and do something else while the advertisements are being collectively received. Hence, considering the possibility that the advertising effect of the advertisements which are collectively distributed may not be as high as the advertisements which are distributed in divisions, that is, before and after the program and/or during the program, the number of points gained by collectively receiving the advertisements may be set lower than the case where the advertisements are received in divisions.

Next, a more detailed description will be given of the other processes carried out by the step S10 shown in FIG. 2, by referring to FIG. 23. FIG. 23 is a flow chart for explaining a process of the step 10 which is dependent on the settings made on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6. In FIG. 23, a step S141 inputs detailed information of the advertisements which are set by the user on the details setting screen shown in FIG. 6, and a step S142 decides whether or not the advertisement collective reception method for collectively

receiving the advertisements is set. If the
decision result in the step S142 is NO, a step S143
inserts and distributes the advertisements before
and after the program and/or during the program, and
5   the process advances to a step S147 which will be
described later. On the other hand, if the decision
result in the step S142 is YES, a step S144 decides
whether or not the reception before the program is
set for the advertisement collectively reception
10   method.

        If the decision result in the step S144 is
YES, a step S145 distributes all of the
advertisements before the program, and the process
advances to the step S147 which will be described
15   later. If the decision result in the step S144 is
NO, a step S146 distributes all of the
advertisements after the program, and the process
advances to the step S147. The step S147 decides
whether or not the advertisements have been
20   distributed up to the end (that is, up to the last
advertisement). If the decision result in the step
S147 is NO, a step S148 carries out a non-
distributed advertisement process. The non-
distributed advertisement process subtracts the
25   number of points corresponding to the non-
distributed advertisements from the number of points
owned by the user. If the number of points becomes
a negative value as a result of this subtraction by
the non-distributed advertisement process, it is
30   possible to take measures so that the user cannot
receive the selected contents unless the user
receives the advertisements which will make the
number of points owned by the user a positive value
or, so that the user will first receive the
35   remaining advertisements which were previously not
received before the user is able to receive the next
selected contents. Of course, in a case where not

all of the contents are distributed to the user, it is possible to similarly add a number of points corresponding to the non-distributed contents to the number of points owned by the user. After the step

5 S148 or, if the decision result in the step S147 is YES, the process ends.

In addition to the points which are gained depending on the advertisements received and the receiving format selected by the user, it is

10 possible to give away gift points to the user when the user makes a correct answer to a quiz, so that the gift points may be added to the pooled points. Moreover, it is possible to give away gift points to the user who answers questionnaires. The

15 questionnaire may include questions asking impressions and the like of the advertisements received by the user, and the gift points may be given to the user for each answered question, for example. Furthermore, the quizzes may be

20 distributed to the user together with the advertisements, in the form of quiz-type advertisements.

In the above case, the user not only gains points by receiving the advertisements, but also

25 gains gift points by enjoying and answering the quizzes or questionnaires, and the gained points may be effectively utilized to receive the desired contents. On the other hand, the advertiser can appeal to the user by giving the quizzes or

30 questionnaires related to the matters of interest to the advertiser, so that the information obtained through the answers to the quizzes or questionnaires may be used to make the advertising products more appealing to the users. The advertiser can also

35 make an opportunity for the user to know more about the advertising products. The questionnaires can also provide the advertiser with a means of easily

and freely gathering opinions or comments from the users.

When making the quizzes using the quiz-type advertisement, the rules may be described within the advertisement. For example, the rules may state that 5 gift points are given away for every correct answer out of 10 quizzes, and that 30 bonus points will be given in addition to the 50 gift points if the answers to all of the 10 quizzes are correct. When the user answers the quizzes, the results are gathered in the Web server 28 or the like, and the gift points dependent on the results, that is, the correct answers, are given away to the user.

For example, the questionnaires including 10 questions may be sent using the quiz-type advertisement. When the user answers the questions, the results are gathered in the Web server 28 or the like, and the gift points dependent on the results, that is, the number of questions answered, are given away to the user.

FIG. 24 is a flow chart for explaining a point give-away process which distributes the quiz-type advertisements and gives away gift points to the user. In FIG. 24, a step S131 starts distribution of the quiz-type advertisements. For example, the quiz-type advertisements may be distributed based on the setting made by the user or the provider. A step S132 decides whether or not an answer wait time has elapsed from a time when a quiz is given to the user. If the decision result in the step S132 becomes YES, a step S133 decides whether or not an answer to the quiz is obtained from the user. If the decision result in the step S133 is YES, a step S134 decides whether or not the answer is correct. If the decision result in the step S134 is YES, a step S135 carries out an adding process to

add gift points corresponding to the correct answer
to the points of the user accumulated in the point
accumulating part 27.

5
If the decision result in the step S133 or
S134 is NO or, after the step S135, a step S136
decides whether or not bonus conditions, such as
correct answers to all of the quizzes, are satisfied.
If the decision result in the step S136 is YES, a
step S137 carries out an adding process to add bonus

10
points, which are given away when the bonus
conditions are satisfied, to the points of the user
accumulated in the point accumulating part 27. If
the decision result in the step S136 is NO or, after
the step S137, the process ends.

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Therefore, the points of the user can be
increased and decreased, that is, adjusted,
depending on specific conditions other than the
advertisements and the formats of the advertisements.
The specific conditions are, for example, the non-

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distributed advertisements and/or contents, gifts
and bonuses. Consequently, it is possible to carry
out fine and detailed management of the points for
each user.

FIG. 25 is a diagram showing the formats

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of the advertisements received by the terminal
equipment 3 and displayed on the display unit of the
terminal equipment 3. A menu 51, a display screen
52, a banner advertisement 53 outside the display
screen 52, a banner advertisement 54 inside the

30
display screen 52, and a sub-window 55 are displayed
in a browser screen 50 shown in FIG. 25. As an
example of the intra-contents advertisement, a
product 60 which is to be advertised, is included
within the contents that are displayed in the

35
display screen 52.

When distributing the advertisement before
and after the contents and/or during the contents,

the advertisement and the contents are alternately
displayed within the display screen 52. In this
state, at least one of the banner advertisements 53
and 54 may be displayed. In addition, it is also
5   possible to display an advertisement within the sub-
window 55. In this case, it is desirable not to
reproduce the audio corresponding to the matters
displayed in the sub-window 55, and to reproduce
only the audio corresponding to the matters
10 displayed within the display screen 52.

    An advertisement similar to the
advertisement distributed before and after the
program may be displayed in the sub-window 55.
However, when the sub-window 55 is displayed with a
15 large size, it becomes difficult to distinguish the
sub-window 55 and the display screen 52. Hence, in
this case, it is possible to give points depending
on whether the audio being reproduced corresponds to
the display screen 52 or the sub-window 55. In
20 other words, the points corresponding to the
advertisement before and after the program may be
given if the audio of the advertisement is
reproduced, and the points corresponding to the
advertisement before and after the program may be
25 reduced by a certain percentage if the audio of the
program is reproduced. For example, a number of
points obtained from [(points of advertisement) x
(fixed 30%) x (size ratio of the contents and the
display screen)] may be given to the user when the
30 audio of the program is reproduced.

    Further, the present invention is not
limited to these embodiments, but various variations
and modifications may be made without departing from
the scope of the present invention.

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